artificial sunlight

By: rumiberri

She's not sure what had compelled her to apply, just that when she saw those eyes, she knew she had found a reason. [AU][Sci-fi ish][No Magic][A]

Rated: Fiction T - English - [Madoka K., Homura A.] - Words: 9,622 - Reviews: 14 - Favs: 20 - Follows: 28 - Published: Sep 14 - id: 10689954

"Next."

A deep breath, and with one hand looped around the handle of her duffel, she steps up to the counter.

"Identification please."

She holds out her left hand, palm facing up.

The attendant places a small, rounded object above the bar code located on her wrist. There's a small beep, followed by a brief flash of red.

"Kaname Madoka," the robotic voice drones out.

She nods, watching as that object disappears behind the counter once more.

"Your signature is required here," a screen appears in front of her, "and here."

She blinks when she sees a piece of paper slipped her way.

"Extra precautions are taken for special cases."

"Oh." She lowers her duffel to the ground.

Her index finger is pressed onto the screen, and there's another beep as her signature is accepted into the computer. She turns to the paper, right hand moving to retrieve the writing utensil offered.

"Uhm." She looks at the attendant. "D-Do I sign my full name? Or...?"

"Anything will suffice. As long as it is legible, and can be legally traced back to you."

She nods.

The pen feels uncomfortable in her hand; she hasn't had to use one since Middle School, and she's slow as she carefully prints out her full name.

Once she finishes, she slides the paper over.

The attendant takes it, and files it away, before handing her a silver keycard.

"This is your main key that grants you access to your room. Do not lose it. It is virtually indestructible, but there have been cases where they have been damaged. A damaged key cannot be replaced. Please keep that in mind."

"O-Okay..."

"Once you scan the key into your computer, the instructions will load automatically. Remember, this is a voluntary program, and if at any time during Phase 1 or Phase 2, you feel you can no longer participate, you may opt out by activating the cancellation button. Doing so will disqualify you immediately. There will be further instructions once you reach Phase 3. Do you have any questions?"

She blinks. "U-Uhm. S-So, after this, I'm going to meet my partner...?"

"That is correct."

"And uhm, w-we're going to be together for a year...?"

"The manual will answer all questions you have regarding time, as well as the process in order to fulfill each Phase. If you have no other questions...?"

It's a clear dismissal, and she glances behind her, to where there's people just like her, waiting to receive their keycards.

"O-Okay," she murmurs. "That's... okay. Thank you."

"Your room number will be in your manual. Thank you for participating in PaPRF. We hope that your stay will be satisfactory."

The attendant bows, and her response is automatic as she bends at the waist. "Thank you..."

"Next."

Keycard now in her pocket, she gathers her duffel, before stepping out of the way.

Past the rows of lines, she pauses as she scans the crowd.

It's impossible to find the specific shade of blue she's looking for, and there's too many heads of green scattered around.

She gives up; if everything goes as planned, she'll be able to contact them in a few months.

She exits that area, and turns when she sees a corner marked with a familiar holographic symbol. Through the transporter, and the walls in this section are speckled with multi-coloured dots painted on steel alloy. Her first glimpse of this design almost a week ago had reminded her of the view outside their space shuttle.

Now, it merely reminds her that she's finally here, and not at home.

There's almost inaudible taps as her sneakered feet hit steel flooring, and she stops when she spots an open seat in one of the many waiting rooms nearby. She rushes across, and barely manages to slink into the chair before someone else claims it. She ignores the gaze that's suddenly concentrated on her, and ignores the clicks of disapproval heard as their gears turn in annoyance.

She keeps her eyes glued on the floor, pretending to fuss with her duffel as she waits.

Once that gaze disappears as another seat frees up, she breathes out a small sigh of relief. A nervous glance around, before she pulls out her keycard.

It's polished silver on one side, and when she flips it around, she finds a white barcode located at the top. She drags her finger across it. A deep breath, and she holds it against her wrist as she simultaneously activates the scanner with her passcode thought.

A small screen appears in front of her, and she waits, watching as a program is installed into her personal computer. When the instructions pop up a moment later, she finds they are the same as the ones sent to her a while back.

Just in case, she skims it over once more.

It's exactly like she remembers, and she continues on to the next page.

Another quick skim, and there's a confirmation button blinking once she reaches the bottom. She clicks it, and it triggers another download.

When that finishes, a shortcut is made, and a red coloured icon is automatically placed into her favourites.

There's one last reminder that pops up, and she dismisses it with a quick thought.

Finally, the next page is what she's been waiting for:

Room 27Gi077.

A beep, and a small map appears on her screen, showing her the fastest route to her assigned room.

She slips the keycard back into her jacket pocket, before she gathers her duffel once more.

She's scared—but also excited.

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She's glad that she's the only one here, because it's been 10 minutes now, and she has been trying to work up her nerves to scan her keycard.

Time is clicking away, and she has already been issued two warnings for loitering in the halls. She has three minutes and twenty four seconds until they will send out a security droid to check on her.

Twenty three.

Twenty two.

A light buzzing is heard to her right, and she turns just in time to see a sweeper drone gliding down the hallway. She follows its movements as it works its way from corner to corner, and steps to the side when it passes her by.

She shakes her head. She's wasting time: two minutes, and thirty seconds.

A deep breath, followed by a slow exhale.

She nods, and holds out the keycard to the shiny red bar located under the room plate.

Words flash on the screen, and she steps back when the doors open with a telltale hiss. The escaping air feels cool against her exposed skin, and she pulls her jacket closer.

She leans forward, feet planted to the floor as she's still unwilling to actually enter. There's not much she can see from here, and she doesn't even know if her partner is actually inside yet.

Three consecutive beeps, and she looks to the screen in alarm.

The doors are closing: with, or without her.

She quickly lifts her duffel higher, and steps forward.

Not a moment too soon.

The door slides shut behind her, and her last glimpse of outside disappears as metal clicks into place.

She sighs, and turns back around.

There's another doorway right in front of her.

She lifts her hands, bringing them to her face as she gently slaps her cheeks.

"Okay," she breathes out.

She nods to herself, before she slowly makes her way through the archway.

A glance around, and the large projection screen straight ahead catches her attention. She blinks at the sheer size. It stretches across the length of an entire wall, and when she spots a two seater sofa placed right in front of it, it reminds her of a personal theatre.

She shakes her head and continues to take in her surroundings.

To her left, there's another door—a peek inside, and she finds it's the bathroom, and to her delight, there's also a sizable bath tub inside. She glosses over the white decor, before turning her attention back towards the room.

There's an open kitchen in the middle, with counters placed to mimic an incomplete, hollow square, and cabinets below that. Walking closer, and she's glad to see the cooking device she had requested has also been installed, and that there's a sanitizer conveniently placed next to it.

To the side of the kitchen, there's a small table coupled with two chairs that she passes along the way.

Past the kitchen, and she notices there's an open space to the right—the bedroom that isn't visible from the entrance.

She gasps, and the figure on the queen sized bed turns.

Sharp, lavender eyes are suddenly staring at her. Black locks trail down freely, and long bangs frame the stranger's face. Female, dressed in a light t-shirt, and a pair of shorts despite the chilly temperature inside.

She's—exactly like her pictures.

But also not.

She swallows heavily, and gently lowers her duffel to the ground.

"U-Uhm. Hi." She gives a weak wave.

Those intense eyes narrow.

She watches as she stands, movement slow. Deliberate. As if she's still deciding if she wants to go through with this.

She knows how that feels. The cancellation button sits right at the corner of her mind. One click, one push, and everything will be over.

She exhales, and turns her attention back to the present.

Her—partner is already standing in front of her.

A bit taller than her, even with her feet bare. Lean, with a bit of definition on her lanky limbs. Skin, pale.

Beautiful.

A thin hand is held out. "...Akemi Homura. You must be Kaname Madoka."

She nods, and accepts her hand.

A firm grip, before they both let go.

She glances up, only to find lavender still watching her.

They're both—tense, and the atmosphere around them is all but awkward.

She inhales, and slowly relaxes.

A smile plays across her lips. "Please, call me Madoka. Is it alright if I call you Homura-chan?"

Homura blinks. "I do not mind."

She grins. "Homura-chan. It's nice to meet you. I hope, uhm, that we'll get along."

Homura slowly nods, eyes still watching, still evaluating her. "...Yes. Likewise, Madoka."

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She's given a quick tour from a dry voice, and once that's done, she starts unpacking.

Her belongings are slipped into the top drawers of their shared dresser, and she leaves her empty duffel next to the military issued suitcase in the closet.

Still nervous, she lowers her body to the bed, eyes watching Homura, who's sitting on the sofa with her legs crossed, head bowed as she absently browses through the programs installed in their room.

"Uhm."

Homura glances over.

"W-When did you arrive, Homura-chan?"

"...A few days ago."

She blinks. "You were already here for that long?"

Homura turns back to the computer screen. "...We're required to check-in early for a re-evaluation, and another complete physical exam."

Her mouths opens. "Oh. R-Right... to make sure that you're stable enough, right?"

"Yes."

She shifts nervously. Homura isn't making things easier; so far, she has been the one asking the questions.

"Homura-chan?"

A flicker of lavender sent her way.

"Uhm. That is... c-can you come here?"

She's sure that Homura is going to refuse, but she hears a soft sigh, before she sees her stand.

Homura strides over with long steps, and stops in front of the bed. "Did you need something, Madoka?"

She likes the way Homura pronounces her name. It's clear, and there's a small lilt of an accent that she hasn't heard before.

She pats the area right next to her. "Please, sit."

Obediently, Homura takes a seat, and Madoka turns to face her.

"A-Anyways. I think, we should get to know each other. T-That's what Phase 1 is all about, isn't it?"

Homura tilts her head. "...You should have received my file months prior to our meeting."

She nods. "Yes, I did. But—it's not the same."

"...I'm not sure what you're asking of me, Madoka."

She smiles. "Let's just, talk."

"...About?"

"Anything! Anything at all."

A blank look.

"Uhm, like," she tries to think of something, "w-what did you eat earlier, for breakfast?"

"...I have not eaten yet."

She blinks. "What?"

"I was told you were to arrive today, and to have my first meal with you."

She raises her eyebrows. "I-It's the evening, Homura-chan! Registration didn't finish until just a bit ago. How long have you been waiting?"

Homura shrugs.

"Y-You could have at least snacked on something!"

"I didn't want to touch anything before you arrived."

"What?" She holds out a hand to her forehead. "W-Wait. Don't tell me... What have you been eating these past few days...?"

"I packed rations, and have been eating them slowly."

Exasperation floods her as she stands. "Let's get you something to eat, Homura-chan."

She moves over to the kitchen and immediately starts browsing their supplies to see what she can make.

"Is there anything you prefer, Homura-chan?"

She looks up, only to see Homura standing besides the table, looking uncomfortable.

Their eyes meet, before Homura once more glances away.

"I have no preferences. Anything will suffice."

She sighs. At least that means that Homura isn't picky. "Something simple then, since I assume you are starving."

Homura turns to face her. "I am fine. I have hunger suppressors enabled."

She grips a metal container in her hand tightly. "...We'll work on that, okay, Homura-chan?"

Homura tilts her head.

"After this, we'll exchange computer information; I want to know which functions you have turned on and off."

"...Alright."

She grins, and rolls up her jacket sleeves after she places the container onto the counter.

"Anyways, you're in luck, Homura-chan. My Papa-er, my dad is a first class chef, and I directly mentored under him for 17 years. Though, of course, I didn't really start cooking until Middle School..."

"...That is your occupation? It was listed that you are a student."

She sighs, deflating ever so slightly. "We're going to need to work on that as well, Homura-chan."

"I'm not sure I understand what you are implying, Madoka."

She smiles to herself. Guess she really does have her work cut out for her.

But, a year is plenty of time to make some kind of dent, right?

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She has her elbows propped on the table, chin sitting in the palm of her hands as she watches Homura eat.

All her life, so used to her Papa's cooking, she realizes that she has never seen someone eat so mechanically; that is, she has never seen someone just going through the actions without actually enjoying their food.

Homura is eating slowly, working her way through the plate with a sense of detachment.

One forkful of eggs, followed by a bite of bread.

Starch, and then a bit of meat.

"...How is it, Homura-chan?"

"It is sufficient. Thank you, Madoka."

She sighs. If her Papa was here, he would be crying.

"How does it taste," she insists.

Homura pauses, fork now hovering in the air as her eyes flicker over to Madoka. "The taste...?"

Madoka stares at her. "Wait, do you have your taste receptors turned off?"

A nod of confirmation.

"...Turn them on, please."

"...Alright."

"They're on?"

"Yes."

She blinks. She hadn't even seen her eyes move. "Okay, now, eat, and then tell me how it tastes."

Homura is staring at her, and she stares back.

Hesitantly, the food on her fork disappears into her mouth.

A slow chew, before she swallows.

"Well?"

"...It tastes, like what I assume egg would taste like...?"

Madoka sighs. She leans forward, until her chin is resting on the table as her arms are stretched out in front of her. "We'll work on that too, Homura-chan."

"...I apologize. Is there something specific I should be tasting?"

She smiles slightly, remembering her Papa's words. "...Food is a chef's life. If people don't enjoy the food that is cooked, what do they have to live for?"

Homura lowers her fork to her plate. "...You wish to have your talents reaffirmed?"

She lifts her head. "...You make it sound so bad when you say it like that."

Homura blinks. "Is that not what you meant?"

She puffs out her cheeks. "You—" She turns away with a sigh. "Nevermind. Finish your food, Homura-chan."

"...Alright."

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Dishes into the sanitizer, and now they're both sitting on the bed, once more facing each other.

Madoka is frowning at her screen, staring at the list of functions Homura has turned off.

A handful of emotions, all of her senses.

Dream sequencing.

Certain memory paths.

"Homura-chan." Her voice is tense.

"Yes?"

She's about to reprimand her, when she notices there are locks on certain functions. She presses one out of curiosity, and a screen automatically pops up.

'Authorization denied.'

She blinks. "What is this?"

"You do not have the authorization to access those controls."

Her gaze slowly glides over. "...I mean, why are they locked?"

Homura tilts her head. "It is standard military procedure, to maintain functionality for soldiers."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "That wasn't listed on your file."

Homura shrugs. "I do not know why they did not include it. I believe if we complete Phase 3, authorization will be granted to your profile."

Madoka stares at her. A moment, before she sighs. "Okay... so, pretty much this explains why you're..." she gestures, "like that." She pauses. "...Do you have authorization?"

Homura shakes her head. "No. There are a series of tests that I need to pass in order to be granted authorization."

"You haven't taken them?"

Homura looks away. "...I wasn't able to pass."

"Oh..." She turns back to the screen. "W-Well, hopefully we'll be able to do something about them, later."

Homura doesn't reply.

"For now, you should at least turn on your senses..."

"...All of them?"

She nods. "Yes. There's no need for you to have them off."

Less than a second, and she sees that Homura has switched them back on.

"...How do you do that so quickly?"

"We are trained in mental exercises to keep reaction times almost instantaneous."

"Mm... are they easy to learn?"

"I would recommend against using them."

"What? Why?"

"Surgery is required, and a remapping of certain functions of the brain."

"..." She lowers her screen. "Was it voluntary?"

"Which?"

"The—surgery. W-Were you allowed to tell them no?"

Homura blinks. "It was during the Colonization Wars."

She slams her screen onto the table. It briefly fizzles, before returning back to normal. "That was ten years ago! You would've been—7 at that time!"

"...It is a recommended procedure for younger soldiers, since our recovery time is faster, and we will adapt quicker."

Madoka clicks off the screen, Homura's words suddenly making her sick to her stomach.

There are things about the war—and the soldiers that she has learned in school, but there are plenty of things that she doesn't know.

"..And this doesn't upset you?"

Homura shuts down her own screen. "It is no concern of mine. It enabled me to survive, which is its main function."

She shakes her head, not for the first time feeling disgusted with the system, and their child soldiers. "...At least, if we pass this, you won't be needed out in the field anymore."

Homura blinks once more. "If that happens, yes, but you will also need to withdraw my profile from the system and deny me permission from rejoining the ranks."

"...What? I thought they sent you to this program because you needed to be rehabilitated? They're not supposed to send rehabilitated soldiers back to the field."

"As of now, I am still considered a soldier, placed on medical leave. If needed, I can be called to the field at any time."

Madoka narrows her eyes. "...Remind me to withdraw your profile when we finish this, Homura-chan."

"...You sound very positive that we will reach Phase 3."

Madoka smiles. "Yes, I am. And you should be, as well."

"...I see."

Madoka absently checks the time, and is surprised to see that it's already 8pm. Despite not doing much, the evening had disappeared into night.

She's not that hungry, and decides instead to take that long awaited bath.

"I'm going to take a bath Homura-chan."

"Alright."

Madoka eyes her.

"...Yes?"

"Where I'm from, it's not uncommon for friends to bathe together."

"You wish to bathe together?"

Madoka nods.

"...I usually shower in the morning."

"Are you turning me down?"

Homura frowns. "I'm afraid I don't understand the purpose in bathing together. Is it for economical reasons?"

Madoka merely stands. She reaches over, and grabs Homura's hand. "No, more for emotional reasons. And, since we're both girls, it's not like you have anything I haven't seen before."

Homura is reluctantly pulled to her feet.

"Not to mention," Madoka continues as she starts heading to the dresser for her pajamas, "we are going to be together for a year..." She pauses. "...And longer, so we might as well get this over with."

"...We are doing this because we are both of the same gender? If I were male, or if you were male, we wouldn't be doing this?"

Madoka turns away with a blush. "W-Well, we probably wouldn't be doing this right after meeting each other, at least."

"...For reproduction purposes? I am sure there is a function that can be installed—"

Madoka whirls on her with a frown. "Homura-chan. We are just going to take a bath, okay? I will wash your back, and you will wash mine. It's to help us bond. I'll even wash your hair for you." She gently lifts a few strands of Homura's hair; it's surprisingly soft. "It's probably annoying for you to wash, right?" She tugs on her own long hair. "I know sometimes I wouldn't mind a personal assistant just to help me."

Homura tilts her head. She's about to mention the quick dry function installed in the showers, but Madoka is already moving, pulling clothes from her part of the dresser.

"Get your pajamas ready, Homura-chan."

"Pajamas...?"

"The clothes you sleep in at night." She freezes. "You, do sleep in clothes, right?"

To her surprise, she's sure she sees a bit of pink on Homura's cheeks.

"Y-Yes." Homura quickly crouches to retrieve them from the drawer.

While Madoka waits, she checks Homura's profile. She sees something she had missed earlier; her lips tug into a smile.

She looks over, and Homura is standing nearby with some clothes in her hands.

"Mm... those are your pajamas, Homura-chan?"

"...I wear them to sleep, yes."

Madoka dismisses her screen, before she quickly rifles through her clothes for another set of pajamas. "I'm a bit shorter than you, but I think you'll fit these."

She holds them out.

Homura blinks. "I have clothes."

Madoka gestures to the military issued jersey. "For the time being, you are no longer in the military, Homura-chan. Here, these will be your 'civilian clothes.' We'll buy more once we reach Phase 3. For now, you'll have to make do with these."

Homura stares at her, and Madoka waits a moment, before she shoves them into her hands.

"Okay, let's go take a bath now, Homura-chan."

Homura blinks, but Madoka is grabbing her arm, and leading her across to the bathroom.

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She stretches her legs in front of her; the water temperature feels great.

After weeks of quick showers, she's relishing the feeling of being able to relax in their surprisingly wide bathtub.

She glances over, to where Homura is sitting on the opposite end, looking less like the military soldier she had met this evening, and more like the shy girl mentioned in her profile.

She moves her arms, and there's water resistance as she creates gentle waves in their tub.

The actions has Homura looking up, and she's sure the blush on her cheeks is not from the hot water.

"Homura-chan, I'll wash your back now."

She stands, and Homura quickly looks away.

"Homura-chan?"

She sees Homura draw her knees in closer, chin and mouth now submerged in water.

"There's nothing to be shy about. Aren't military showers public?"

There's bubbles coming from Homura as she breathes out into the water.

"Homura-chan." There's a certain tone in her voice that makes Homura look up. "Come here, and let me wash your back."

She points to the bath stool already set up.

Homura glances to her, before she reluctantly stands.

Madoka continues watching her, knowing it's rude to stare, but she can't seem to pull her eyes away.

Homura's body—is lined with scars of various sizes.

There's one though, that extends from her sternum, curving down underneath her ribs, and, as Homura turns around to take her seat, she can see that it ends in the middle of her back.

Madoka kneels, and her fingers are gently trailing that section of disfigured skin.

"...How did you get this?" she asks quietly.

Homura stiffens under her touch. "...One of the enemies pulled a knife; didn't see him until it was too late."

She winces. How did she even survive that?

Homura shifts, and she knows she has stared for too long.

She reaches over, and grabs a small bath towel. A quick dab of soap onto the cloth, before she slowly drags it across Homura's skin.

"Does it still hurt?" she murmurs, hands still moving.

Those bony shoulders shift as Homura shrugs. "Only a little. Most of my pain receptors are off."

Right, she had seen that.

"It must have been scary."

Homura turns her head; she knows: her fear receptors are also off.

She sighs softly. "Homura-chan."

"Yes?"

"Mm... Nevermind."

"...Alright."

They're both quiet, Madoka working slowly as the occasional drips from the faucet hit the bathtub, and break up the silence.

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She falls across the bed, soft blankets catching her.

A sigh of content. "Baths are great, aren't they, Homura-chan?"

She feels the bed shift, and turns to see Homura taking a tentative seat by the edge; the pajamas seem to fit her fine.

"I suppose," Homura murmurs. "Do you take baths often, Madoka?"

She blinks. She moves, until she's now propping herself up with one arm as she faces Homura. "Mm, yeah. Almost every day. It's relaxing. I used to fall asleep sometimes." She smiles. "Had some close calls during Middle School..."

Homura glances at her. "...That doesn't sound very safe."

She laughs. "Yeah. Mama—Uhm. I mean, my mom banned me from baths for a while, until I could prove to her that I wouldn't fall asleep anymore."

She stifles a yawn.

"Hmmm. It's still a bit earlier than when I'm used to sleeping, but I feel pretty tired. How about you, Homura-chan?"

"I usually sleep a bit later, but I don't mind turning in early."

Madoka sits up. She scoots to the edge of the bed, and reaches for the computer screen attached to the wall once she's close enough.

All the lights are dimmed, and the large projection screen enters into night mode, complete with stars, and a picture of the Old Milky Way.

"Is this alright?" she asks, turning to Homura. "I usually need a little bit of light to sleep..."

Homura shrugs. "That's fine."

She nods, and sets the screen back into its notch.

"Okay, which side do you want, Homura-chan?"

"Whichever. I have no preference."

"Oh!" Madoka hops off the bed, and heads over to the dresser. One drawer is opened, before she pulls out a keepsake from home.

At Homura's blank look, she grins.

"This is Ichigo-chan." She holds out the large bunny for Homura to see.

"...I see."

"I'll take the left side, if you don't mind, Homura-chan."

"That's fine."

Madoka crawls over to her side of the bed, immediately sighing in content as the mattress seems to conform to her body.

She turns, and watches as Homura lies down, noting that she's sticking as close to the edge as possible.

Grinning, Madoka moves closer.

Homura rolls over when she feels movement. She blinks when she finds Madoka a small distance away.

"...Did you want this side instead?"

"No." Madoka reaches over for her pillow. She settles it right next to Homura's.

"Uhm. W-What are you doing?"

Madoka smiles. "Goodnight, Homura-chan."

She sits up, and pulls the blanket close, until it covers the both of them. A small readjust of the bunny in her arms, before she snuggles against the pillows.

Her eyes are closed, and she can feel Homura roll over to face away.

This upcoming year, is definitely going to be interesting.

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Phase 1 lasts a minimum of two weeks, with the maximum set to one month.

It's the time to test for compatibility, and to see if partners are willing to take the next step into Phase 2.

One week in, and she feels like she has most of Homura's character down.

Aloof at first, but the further she tries to scratch the surface, the more timid she becomes. Obedient, and a firm voice will have her easily accepting orders.

It's when she's given the freedom of choice that she falters, and most of the time she follows after Madoka, unsure of what to do.

At this moment, Madoka is browsing through her computer, reading up on current events as Homura sleeps, curled against her side.

It's been a few days since Madoka had her restore her sleep and hunger functions to normal, and she's been having problems readjusting.

She glances down; Homura's current sleep cycle will continue for two more hours.

She sets her alarm clock to wake her when Homura wakes, and once that's done, she turns over on her side, slipping her arms around Homura's waist as her eyes close.

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Two weeks are approaching, and they're both lounging lazily on their queen sized bed once more. Or, at least Madoka is, and she has forced Homura to lie down with her.

There really is nothing to do at this moment, and watching Homura go through her exercise regime makes her antsy.

She wants fresh air and clear skies, not a projection screen that merely shows them what it looks outside.

"I can't wait until Phase 2 starts," she grumbles.

Homura remains quiet. Madoka looks at her, and she sees that Homura is keeping busy by doing maintenance on her computer.

She notices though that those lavender eyes are drooping once more. She reaches out until her fingers are gently threading through Homura's hair.

Homura leans into her touch, eyes slowly closing.

Madoka smiles sadly. Just a little bit of affection, and Homura is practically wrapped around her finger.

She breathes out slowly. It's not the first time she thinks about reforming the system; rehabilitated soldiers are so easily exploited...

How many are like Homura, being taken advantage of...?

"Tomorrow..."

Homura's eyes open at the sound of her voice.

"Phase 2 starts tomorrow, Homura-chan."

She nods sleepily.

Madoka pulls her in close. "Homura-chan, when you were younger, what did you want to be when you grew up?"

"...W-What?" she mumbles, half asleep.

"...For a short time, I wanted to be like Papa. I wanted to be a cook," Madoka whispers. "It's why I started learning from him. I enjoyed it, but, it wasn't really something I wanted to make an occupation out of."

Homura closes her eyes. "T-Then," she breathes out softly, "...what do you want to be...?"

"Mm... Someone... strong enough to help others."

"...I wanted... I wanted to be a doctor, like my parents," Homura tells her, her voice a mere whisper against her ear. "I—wanted to be a hero." Her hands grip Madoka tightly, as tears appear at the edges of her eyes. "But—I—I've hurt so many people..."

Madoka wraps her arms around her. "It's not your fault, Homura-chan. The war..."

"W-We're not allowed to die," she whispers. "I w-wanted to—but they never let me. I d-don't have authorization."

"Homura-chan..."

"I-I'm tired, Madoka. S-So tired..."

"Shhh." She gently strokes her head. "You can go to sleep, Homura-chan."

"O-Okay..."

Eventually, her breathing evens out, and she knows that Homura has finally fallen asleep.

She sighs, and leans her head against hers.

It would be a very long process, and she's not sure if she'd actually be able to make a difference.

But—

/

When 9am hits, they're both still in bed when there's a beeping sound from the main computer. It's loud enough that it wakes them up.

Madoka untangles herself from Homura, before she reaches for the screen.

As she's blinking awake and waiting for the message to load, Homura is sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

"...What is it?" Her voice is still heavy with sleep, and a bit raspy.

"Mm..." Madoka scans the message. "Ah. It says, as soon as we're ready, we can leave the room by the back door." She blinks. "Back door?"

Homura is fixing her hair, and gives her a small nod. "It's behind the projection screen."

"Oh, no wonder." She glances to Homura. "How did you know?"

"I was here before you, remember?"

"Right..." She swipes the screen, and smiles in amusement when the next page explains how to access the back door.

"Let's get ready, and then start Phase 2, Homura-chan."

"Alright."

\\

When they step through the back door, the metal walls immediately makes her groan.

The instructions—had made Phase 2 sound like it took place outside.

Not in an empty room.

Homura glances around. "It's a simulation room."

Madoka blinks. "W-What?"

Homura accesses her computer, and after a few thoughts, the screens on all the walls boot up.

"They use this in the military," she explains, voice quiet as she fiddles with the controls. "It—actually makes sense that they would use this. It's a lot more realistic than it seems."

Madoka pulls up her own screen, and finds that there's a program now installed, labeled Phase 2. She opens it.

"Huh..." It's a list of scenarios that they'll need to go through—and pass—in order to continue on with Phase 3.

She turns to Homura.

"Should we try it out?"

Homura shrugs.

She understands that means that she should take the lead. She goes through the list—and decides that something simple, like 'shopping at the market' sounds like a good place to start.

She chooses it—and everything around them slowly fades away.

Her eyes involuntarily close as dizzying patterns scroll across the screens.

'*Sequence beginning in three... two... one*.'

There a gentle murmur in her ear, and when she opens her eyes, she blinks when she realizes that she's in a supermarket.

She glances down; she's still in the same clothes of a simple t-shirt, and shorts. A look over, and Homura is there, still in the same clothes as well.

"Hmm." She brings up her screen and does a quick search for the settings. It's not too hard to find, and she clicks on the tab where she can change their clothes.

She briefly thinks, and Homura blinks when she's now in a white sundress.

"Madoka...?"

Madoka grins, and changes her clothes to a matching light pink dress. Sandals adorn their bare feet, and she adds a canvas bag around her arm.

She closes the screen before she reaches over, her free arm looping around Homura's.

"Let's go shopping, Homura-chan."

A blink, but Madoka tugs her forward, and Homura obediently follows.

/

It's—a supermarket. Aisles lined with food. Separate sections for vegetables, meat, dairy, and other goods.

Screens where they can queue, with the option of manually walking through each part in order to see what they're going to buy.

She decides to browse the vegetables that are straight ahead.

A bit of homesickness seeps through as the familiar sights enter her vision; she always went shopping with her dad every weekend.

She drags Homura along, and they're passing an older couple, when she hears one of them click their tongue as they walk by.

She turns in surprise.

They're not looking at her, however.

They're looking at Homura, and she can see the disgust written in their faces.

"Soldiers should remain out of sight, out of mind," one of them whispers none too discreetly.

Madoka's eyebrows shoot up, but she feels herself being pulled: Homura is trying to move away.

She throws her a glare, and Homura immediately stops.

She whirls back towards the couple, who are still making comments even though Homura is standing right there.

"Excuse me?" Madoka snaps, voice clipped and slightly raised.

The couple glances at her. "You shouldn't be associating with something like that," one of them points at Homura, their tone condescending, as if she was less than human.

"'Something like that?'" she repeats, volume rising. "What do you mean by 'something like that?'" she demands. "Homura-chan is—"

"A killer," one of them hisses. "I know what that is. I can see their profile as clear as day."

"Madoka."

Anger is making her eyes burn as frustrated tears gather, but she feels Homura tug on her arm.

"Homura-ch—"

"Our points are dropping," Homura points out softly.

"W-What?" She sniffles, and quickly checks on their stats; they're about 10 points from failing the scenario.

She frowns.

"H-How...?"

"You should take that thing, and leave. They're not welcomed here," another voice spits out.

She looks around, only to find that they're suddenly surrounded.

"W-Wha—"

"Get out of here! Haven't you already done enough?"

"I'm going to end the sequence, Madoka."

"Wait—Homura-cha—"

The scenery fades away, until it's just her, and Homura standing once again in that empty room.

"W-What was that...?" She turns to face Homura, who has her eyes averted to the floor.

"It... was the supermarket," Homura replies, voice still soft.

Madoka clears their distance, hands immediately on Homura's shoulders. "I-Is that... is that what usually happens...?"

Homura shrugs helplessly. "I'm... not sure. I never really leave the base." She glances up. "It's... not recommended, as we aren't usually welcomed."

She vaguely remembers the reactions people gave her when she had filled out her application.

She had ignored it then, but now...

She blinks, and the gathered tears finally fall.

"Homura-chan..." She throws her arms around her, and hugs her close. "I'm so sorry."

Homura remains standing, arms to her side, as Madoka continues to cry into her shoulder.

/

They go through two more scenarios, and though things start off perfectly fine, once the news hits that there's a soldier in the midst, the crowd turns hostile.

Madoka angrily stomps her foot. "I don't—I don't get it! Why..."

Homura is to her side, still quiet.

Madoka growls, and checks over the settings.

"They... always mention your profile..." She quickly selects Homura's profile. "Maybe..."

She chooses Homura's occupation, and deletes 'soldier' from the box.

'Access denied.'

She puffs out her cheeks. "Fine," she grits out.

She selects Homura's name instead, and deletes her surname.

"...What are you doing?"

"Changing your profile," Madoka tells her absently.

She types in 'Kaname.'

'Save changes?'

She grins, and immediately chooses her occupation, deleting 'soldier' once it's selected.

'Save changes?'

She saves everything twice, before closing the screen.

"There, that should help some things."

Homura is staring at her. "...Are you allowed to do that?"

"They didn't stop me. Plus, I mean, if we go through Phase 3, that's kind of what will happen, won't it? So, we're just... preemptively doing some changes, to make the process a bit easier."

Homura blinks. "...It won't disqualify us?"

Madoka stares at her for a moment. She sighs. "Alright, I'll contact the help desk, and see what they say."

/

Madoka grins triumphantly. "See?"

Homura can only nod.

"Alright, let's—" Her stomach rumbles, and she checks the time. "...Let's have lunch first, and then we'll try this again."

"Alright."

Madoka grabs Homura's hand, and they walk back towards their room.

\\

The next scenario, Madoka decides she wants to go to the beach.

Clear blue skies.

Waves as they crash the shore, leaving bubbles of sea foam to scatter along the sands.

Sun bright enough to make her eyes squint.

If not for the timer, and the small window keeping track of their interactions, she could be fooled into thinking that this is real.

Homura refuses to wear a bathing suit, and after remembering how her body is lined with scars, she has Homura wear a light sundress once more.

She herself dons a red coloured bikini with a jacket covering her; this is the beach, real or not, and she's going to enjoy it.

Hand intertwined with Homura's, they walk along one of the numerous jetties found nearby.

She smiles, watching as small crabs scamper along the barnacle covered rocks.

A deep breath, and she can almost taste salt on her tongue.

"...This simulator is really realistic."

Homura is quiet, and merely nods.

She blinks. "Homura-chan?"

Homura is watching the floor, and she extends her leg to poke her toe at a resting starfish caught in the rocks.

"Yes, Madoka?"

"...What do they normally use these simulators for?"

She sees Homura eying the starfish. "...Usually to prep for a mission." She closes her eyes. "To acclimate to climate change, adapting to culture differences. Learning the languages... to learn the best areas to attack, and to see if certain tactics will work..."

She holds Homura's hand tighter. "...and they're using the same things for your rehabilitation..."

Homura opens her eyes to glance at her. "...Yes?"

She sighs. "Let's... walk to the end, and come back."

"...Alright."

By the time Madoka feels like she has enjoyed the beach to her heart's content, she finds that it has already turned into evening.

As she starts working on dinner, Homura takes a seat at the table, and like always, starts tinkering with her computer, doing whatever she does whenever Madoka is busy.

A quick chop of vegetables. Once done, Madoka slides her finger across the flat of the blade, letting the slices that have stuck drop into the bowl.

"Homura-chan?"

"Yes, Madoka?"

"Can you get me another bowl?"

"Alright."

The scratch as a chair is pushed back, and Madoka watches as Homura pads over to the cabinets.

"Big, or small?"

"A bigger one, if possible."

"Alright."

Homura crouches, and reaches further back for one of the larger bowls.

Madoka eyes her slim frame; Homura really is rather thin for a soldier.

Then again, she wouldn't be surprised if they had enhancers added to their meals as well.

A light tap as a bowl is lowered to her side, and she looks up to find Homura staring at her.

"Will that be all, Madoka?"

"Mm..." She glances down to the bowl, before she turns back to Homura. "Homura-chan?"

"Yes?"

"...Can you cook?"

Homura blinks in surprise. "Cook?"

Madoka nods. "Cook."

"...A little."

"What have you made before?"

A shrug of her shoulders. "It was... some type of animal; I still don't quite remember what it was, but I was in charge of roasting it."

"Ah..." Madoka nervously glances away. Figures that it would be some kind of military thing.

She blinks.

"Wait, roasting? Like," she holds her hand, moving it around as if winding something, "spitfire, type of roast?"

Homura stares at her. "...It was over an open fire, yes, if that is what you mean. We made a broth as well, out of the nearby vegetation. It was... interesting."

"...but you had your taste receptors off, right?"

Here, Homura shakes her head. "No, it was during a survival mission. We are required to have most of our functions turned on."

"That... doesn't sound fun."

Homura shrugs. "It is an annual event. Required."

Madoka purses her lips, and barely manages to bite back her comment. "...What did it taste like then?" she asks instead.

"Very strange." She gestures to the bowls on the counter. "If I had a choice, I would choose your cooking over that."

Madoka blinks, before she feels a smile growing across her face. "R-Really?"

It's maybe the first compliment about her cooking from Homura.

Homura stares at her for a moment. "...Yes."

Feeling suddenly very eager to cook, Madoka shoos her away. "Alright, let me finish this up, and then we'll have dinner, Homura-chan."

"...Alright, Madoka."

/

"Hmm... I wonder if we should retry those scenarios we failed today," Madoka says absently as she continues to scroll through the list.

Homura is finishing her workout, and is too busy controlling her breathing to reply.

"The beach was nice," Madoka continues murmuring. "Is there any place you would like to go, Homura-chan?"

Homura coughs, and slowly rises to her feet from the floor. She shakes her head, still breathing heavily from her push ups.

Madoka glances at her, watching as Homura leans forward, one hand now on her hip as she sucks in large gulps of air.

"Homura-chan? Are you alright?" She sits up, now visibly worried.

Homura coughs once more. "I—" she gasps out. "D-Drawer—"

Madoka hurriedly rushes over to the dresser, and pulls open the bottom drawer that is filled with Homura's clothes without a second thought. She rifles through, all too aware that Homura is coughing loudly behind her.

Her hand knocks into something solid, and she grabs it. She quickly holds it out for Homura to see.

A nod, and she rushes over.

Homura accepts it with shaking hands, face now looking washed out.

The object is held to her mouth, and there's an audible hiss as something is pumped down her throat.

It seems to help, and she straightens out a moment later.

"T-Thank you, Madoka," Homura murmurs.

Madoka glances over, but half her attention is on her computer screen that is now opened to Homura's profile.

She trails down the list, searching for her medical history.

She spots it, and finds the listed entry: Heart problems that were corrected with surgery a few years ago, and a small asterisk that lists a few lingering complications from sustained injuries.

Asthma, and heart palpitations.

She sighs; she should have looked at those closer.

Homura is running her fingers over her inhaler, waiting for the inevitable comment.

"Homura-chan?"

She looks up. "Yes, Madoka?"

"...Does that happen often?"

Homura shakes her head. "N-No. Not usually," she murmurs. "But, I usually have an oxygen supplement when on duty... it's—been two weeks since the last injection."

She sighs; that explains why Homura's asthma had acted up. "You do know this means you will need to cut back on your exercise, right?"

Homura fidgets. "...I need to remain active, or I will lose muscle mass..."

"You are not exercising unless you can do so without hyperventilating!"

Homura flinches, shoulders now hunched. "But..."

"...Find different exercises that aren't so strenuous. I don't have oxygen supplements, and you need to at least last without them until Phase 3."

Homura bows her head. "...Alright."

She grabs her arm, and leads her over to the bed. "Come sit next to me, Homura-chan."

"...Alright."

/

The modifications to Homura's profile makes Phase 2 much, much easier, and they clear a large amount of scenarios within a week.

The more points they accumulate, the more they will have to spend in Phase 3, and she's wondering if they should try and complete everything in order to have as many points as possible.

Not to mention, forcing Homura to cut back her exercise regime leaves her restless, and the only thing that helps is when they're doing scenarios in the simulator.

It's when they finish the first set, and move on to the next, that they run into a snag.

These—are definitely nothing like what she's used to.

She swallows heavily as her eyes skim the list.

She feels a hand on her shoulder, and glances over to see Homura staring at her.

"Do not worry, Madoka. It's not real. The scenario will merely end in case anything happens."

That hardly makes her feel better.

"Uhm... w-which do you think seems the easiest, Homura-chan...?"

She waits as Homura goes over the list. Eventually, she points. "This one seems simple, Madoka."

She looks at Homura's choice. "...Homura-chan. You do know I have no experience with these kinds of things, right?"

Homura nods. "Yes." She presses a few buttons on her screen.

Madoka blinks; Homura's computer is asking for permission to install a program.

"What is it?" she asks, even as she accepts.

"It's a simple program that will at least teach you the basics to combat. All beginners start with this, and it will help to a certain point as your body slowly learns how to adapt."

She stares as it installs functions she thought she would never see on her computer. "Uhm..."

"...You will need it, Madoka. We need to at least pass ten scenarios, in order to reach the last set."

Hesitantly, she nods. "W-Which ones should I turn on...?"

"Hm. Do you prefer close combat, or ranged combat?"

She swallows. "R-Ranged...? That's... uhm, far away, right...?"

Homura nods. "Yes. Enable tracking, as well as magnification of sight. Your main weapon will be the laser gun; I will take point."

"Uhm..." She presses a few buttons, and follows Homura's instructions as she tells her which to turn on.

After a quick tutorial, for once Homura takes the lead and decides that they should delve straight into the scenario for Madoka to learn.

"..." Another nervous gulp, before she glances to Homura who nods.

"Are you ready, Madoka?"

"U-Uhm..." She briefly eyes her computer screen; it's scattered with numbers and different functions that she still has trouble remembering that they're there. "O-Okay..."

A second later, the room disappears, and she closes her eyes as the familiar scrolling flashes across the screens.

A hand is suddenly on her arm, and her eyes open as she feels someone pull her along.

Homura.

"The first thing we need to do is find cover," Homura tells her as they run towards a set of discoloured trees.

"R-Right..."

"Stay right behind me, Madoka."

"O-Okay."

Heart thudding loudly in her chest, she's trying her best to follow Homura's instructions.

She can see Homura looking around, eyes on the lookout for whatever may attack them.

She swallows heavily, and Homura tugs her close as their backs are flushed against one of the larger trees.

"Are you alright, Madoka?"

She shivers at the lower tone in Homura's whisper.

"...Madoka?"

"Y-Yes! I'm-I'm okay, Homura-chan..."

Homura eyes her briefly, before she finally pulls away. "...You remember our main objective?"

She glances to her screen. "Y-Yes... w-we have to... capture one of the uhm, boars on the island...?"

Homura nods, and readjusts her grip on her gun. "Take out your gun, Madoka."

"R-Right..." She fumbles with the holster, and the handle snags against the protective covering.

She tenses when she feels Homura step closer, and a hand is lightly on her waist.

"H-Homura-chan...?" Her gaze is stuck on those lavender eyes that are concentrated below, and it's not the first time she thinks that Homura really is beautiful.

There's a tug, and she finally looks down.

"There," Homura murmurs, holding out her freed gun. "Here, Madoka. You remember the correct grip?"

Homura looks up, only to find Madoka staring at her.

"...Madoka?"

She jumps with a squeak. "Y-Yes, Homura-chan?"

"...Your gun."

She quickly reaches it for, turning her head slightly to hide her blush. "T-Thanks, Homura-chan."

Another scrutinizing look, before Homura straightens out to look beyond their cover. "...If you aren't feeling well, we can take a break, and try the scenario later."

She shakes her head. "N-No! I'm fine..."

A light touch on her arm, and she glances back to Homura. "You'll be fine, alright? I will protect you."

She gulps loudly. "O-Okay... T-Thanks, Homura-chan."

Homura nods. "Look on your radar; tell me the coordinates to the closest group."

"Uhmmm..." Her eyes flicker to the corner as she fumbles, trying to remember the correct letters. "I-In... uhm... section... G?"

A nod of encouragement from Homura, and she feels a bit of confidence grow.

"The... 7th block, by the 19th column."

A split second, before Homura nods. "Good. We'll head in that direction. Do you remember what to do once we encounter them?"

"Uhm..." Her eyebrow furrows. "Hang back, and wait for your signal."

"Yes, very good. Please enable your auto aim as well."

"E-Eh?"

There's a beep on her screen, and she grants Homura permission to her computer.

"Sometimes functions are reset when you enter a scenario... bothersome, but it's a good habit to recheck things before you engage."

Two clicks, and three functions she hadn't known had been turned off, are back online.

"T-Thank you, Homura-chan."

They both close their screens.

"Are you ready, Madoka?"

A deep breath. "Yes!"

"Let's go."

/

They hug close to the sparse wildlife scattered around: trees, bushes, anything that can provide cover.

"See those other dots on the map, Madoka?"

"U-Uh huh..."

"Those are things we do not want detecting us."

"O-Okay..."

Her hands are slick with sweat, and every time they dart out into open ground, she feels her heart hammering in her chest.

A glance to Homura, who looks so undeniably composed because her fear receptors are off, and she wishes she had done the same.

"Wait for me to signal you over," Homura murmurs, and before she can respond, she's moving away.

She pokes her head out, and watches as Homura easily clears the distance, footsteps light and steady.

The wave of her hand, and she knows it's her turn.

As she's moving, she hears a snapping sound behind her, and promptly freezes mid-step.

It's a blue dot on the radar.

"Madoka! Run over here!"

Homura's voice, but she can't seem to get her legs to move. She's shaking, and the gun drops from her hands as a loud scream echoes in her head.

Her eyes scrunch close as her hands press against her ears.

"Madoka!"

Her eyes snap open just as she's pushed back, and there's a splatter of something warm across her face.

With wide eyes, she lands on the floor, her breath knocked out from her.

She sits up confused, and flinches when her hand touches liquid.

A glance down, and she realizes what it is.

A gasp of air, before she screams.

'*Sequence ending*.'

She's still screaming when the scenery disappears, and they're once more in that empty room.

Hands are shaking her shoulders, and it isn't until there's pain across her face that she realizes that it's Homura—

And that she's alive.

She throws her arms around Homura, and buries her face in her chest.

"H-Homura-chan..." she sobs out, gripping her tightly.

"...I apologize, Madoka," Homura murmurs in her ear. "I wasn't aware they could use camouflage..."

She's unable to form proper words, and remains crying as Homura continues to apologiz**e.**

AN: Another AU… definitely a two-shot, at least. It'll be like the others... updated whenever :)) Yes, welcome to my world of continuous MadoHomu AU.

Uhm... yes, I am back from vacation. It was, tiring, but kind of fun! :)) Slowly trying to get back into writing (this was written before I left, and I have been editing slowly. It's a strange story, I know, but... sometimes just gotta write it out in order to continue down the list.) Mmm... what else.

As always, thank you for reading/reviewing :)) I'm recognizing almost all of your names, and there are new faces as well! Really, thanks again!